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Is a New Renaissance (in Classics) Possible?

In Three Parts—Part I

The life of the Φ B K is coterminous with that of our national independence, for in 1776 on the soil of Virginia at William and Mary College the brotherhood that distinguishes scholarship was founded. Harvard and Yale followed in 1780, Yale under President Stiles. For this date we have the testimony of Chancellor James Kent, who as a lad of seventeen shared in the founding in New Haven. Among his classmates of 1781 there were distinguished names, Noah Webster, Oliver Wolcott, Simeon Baldwin, and still we may well pause to marvel when he tells us that then but a slight contact with the New Testament constituted the entire range of Greek studies for all excepting two or three undergraduates, elevated above the rest by the academic title of the *Dean's Scholars*.

But in the last decade of that century the great Jurist that was to be, migrated from Poughkeepsie to New York, and by wide and persistent reading greatly amended his youthful poverty—particularly on the Latin side: here he came to read *con amore*.

In 1831, fifty years after his graduation, when foremost in the Common Law and eminent in what he calls the noblest of secular occupations, Kent delivered at Yale the oration before the Φ B K, a retrospect of half a century as well as an earnest commendation of scholarship. Yale then had been greatly distinguished by the scientific leadership of Silliman, and Woolsey's significant career as a protagonist in Greek studies was just beginning. "The tendency", Chancellor Kent said, on that occasion, "The tendency of some modern theories of education, is to depress the study of ancient languages and literature, and to raise up, in their stead, a more exclusive devotion to the exact sciences and mechanical

philosophy..." On Aug 3, 1791, James Kent, then twenty-eight years old, and a rapidly rising jurist of New York, entered in his diary this item, concerning Homer's Iliad: "Read and finished it with great delight". And in 1793 he made this entry: "I must, however, observe, that the sublimity and pathos of the fierce and barbarous scenes of the Iliad were so powerful and impressive as to render the reading of Homer a rich compensation for all my pains".

Exactly fifty years after Chancellor Kent's pro-classical address at New Haven, Charles Francis Adams at Harvard delivered himself of his noted speech before the Φ B K there, in which he condemned Classicism in the American college as an impotent nuisance of academic tradition, as a Fetish. Mr. Adams, (who graduated in '55) after the conclusion of the Civil War in which he had borne a part not unworthy of his distinguished ancestry, had definitely turned towards railway management. Here he felt with bitterness, how much more useful to his actual ultimate pursuits a firsthand knowledge of, say, mechanical and civil engineering would have been.

As for the genuineness and soundness of his classical training we are unconcerned: Felton and Lane, names honorably known still, were foremost in Classics at Harvard in 1855, I believe,—let their pupils defend them.

The plaintiff on that noted occasion in 1881 unduly magnified, I am inclined to think, his personal case. He did not in youth become clearly conscious of his deeper and genuine vocation, or he would have attended a technical school: unfortunately, however, it is true technical schools fifty years ago, with us, were barely in embryo.

But this mischievous monopoly of the classics has passed away. One step further will bring us up to the actualities of the present time and the present hour. Recently, in 1903, at Boston, President Eliot laid down his personal gospel of education, he defined his personal ideal of culture. He is, as it may be well to remember, a trained chemist by his original professional sphere: he is over-eager to postulate for scientific methods an absolute and universal application: as a matter of fact,

the Scholarship of what the Germans call *Geisteswissenschaften*, does not need to go into alien spheres for a method intrinsically postulated by the critical study of literature and history: Droysen's reply to Buckle disposes of such and similar pretensions. Besides, the most eminent Classicists of all times, Bentley and Scaliger lived long before the era which dreams of pouring all human knowledge into one and the same mould with that of quantitative physical phenomena. As to literature and history, Eliot substantially claims that any adequately similar bulk of study will result in approximately the same amount of cultivation: a matter fairly homogeneous, like a huge Chester cheese, a pound of which will give an athlete about the same strength no matter where cut off. As to the other assertion that cultivation produces morality, that is clearly not true, if history is of any account. Curiously enough, immediately after the President of Harvard's essay, a very different strain of sentiment was uttered: Professor Andrew West said: "To rehabilitate the old state of things is impossible and undesirable. To endure the disintegration and confusion in intellectual standards which has ensued, is also undesirable, and, I believe, impossible".

But there are Scholars in Europe who harbor the idea that Classicism, academic Classicism, will have a rebirth in America. Thus Wilamowitz of Berlin who is the most brilliant representative of Greek studies at the Universities of Germany at the present day, said in his recent official report on the modification of Greek study in the new order of things, when Greek is no longer the prerequisite for entering upon University study at all —: "Gesetzt das Griechische verschwände aus dem Unterrichte der deutschen Schule, so würde eben ein anderes Volk sich eine Jugendbildung schaffen, die geschichtliches und philosophisches Begreifen der Weltkultur aus der Quelle schöpfen lehrte (Amerika ist längst auf dem rechten Wege): dieses würde dann aber auch die Früchte ernten".

This eminent Classicist we see claims more for Hellenism, far more, than President Eliot will admit: "to comprehend, from the very sources thereof what is the universal culture of mankind, and so to comprehend both in a historical manner, and in a philosophical manner". — lofty words, lofty claims, not a mean revelation of the uncommon soul that utters them.

Europe in fact is fairly reverberating with the news of ever new foundations and endow-

ments proceeding from the munificence of American women and men: visions of a new era of liberal culture and specifically of classicism may well rise in the mind of a classical scholar somewhat remote: an age of Maecenas, an age of the Medici — may it not perhaps even now arise and be forming in that transatlantic world of which Bishop Berkeley uttered so glorious a prophecy two hundred years ago?

II

And thus we may begin to enter upon our proper theme: is a new Renaissance in the Classics possible? For in answering this question an exceptionally well suited opportunity will present itself to illuminate and characterize classicism at large. It is a subject apparently as commonplace as *health* or the *weather* or *morality*: all share in it, all are convinced that they are competent to dispose of incidental questions as well as of the intrinsic essence and nature of this world, even though they have like the reluctant infant when confronted with a bitter potion but touched it *summis labris* and although it was but a gymnastic tool for the gradual unfolding and strengthening of their powers.

But even in a vastly more advanced sphere an adequate judgment and a trenchant appreciation is rendered difficult: namely there where the overpowering volume of erudition has gradually rendered puny and feeble, nay has extinguished the sense of that culture without which I for one am frankly prepared not merely to abandon all educational claims for the classics, but even to remove from their academic places the professional exponents of classicism. And we are, indeed, living in a time when the volume of erudition which is superimposed upon the classical world has become comparable to the embrace of the deadly entanglement of the powerful parasitic convolutions of the liane's coils, which finally have come to hinder any further rising of sap in the bark of the tree to which they owe their being; in vain the eyes of the wanderer in the forest look for blossoms or fruit in that tree.

But first: what was the classicism of the Renaissance?

In the first place, it was the claim that the study of *man* and of his intrinsic powers was a study eminently worthy of *man*; and to this end the great writers of pre-Christian antiquity were both subject matter for study, but in a still higher degree were they patterns and models of literary form and literary execution.

The movement was consciously away from scholasticism and from the claim of academic and thus of clerical monopoly, of systems delivered by dictations of rigid formulas in which the fundamentals as well as the most difficult mysteries of the Christian creed were delivered, wired, so to speak, on the categories of Aristotle and placed in exact sequence, utterly foreign to their essence and nature, a sequence furnished by Aristotelian logic. *Dante* even at first had seriously conceived the plan of uttering his great epic in Vergilian hexameters:

"Ultima regna canam," etc, and of the Italian vernacular and of Latin he speaks with this discrimination, (*Convito* I 5): "Latin is not subject, but sovereign through its beauty". And again: "(Latin excels) in nobility: because Latin is *eternal and imperishable*, but the vernacular is inconstant and perishable. This we observe in the ancient comedies and tragedies written in Latin, which cannot be changed and which have remained so to this day; different is the case of the vernacular which is changed according to the pleasure of artistic purpose".

And this fundamental note of marvel and admiration too, for works of letters so perfect, so unchanging, so enduring—it remains the constant attitude of the succeeding generations and centuries, from Petrarch to Erasmus, and to Montaigne and beyond, until in the farther and vastly more spiritual movement of the Reformation this new Classicism became subsidiary or hostile or indifferent: at all events it was dwarfed by something essentially greater than itself. Petrarch with great success urged and exemplified the new movement which coined the term of *literae humaniores* and of *Humanists* which is often used to designate the entire movement. His letters were copied everywhere, still more his verse was admired: as a Latin poet in Vergil's manner, as a Latin letterwriter like Cicero and Pliny, as an essayist in Seneca's vein did the clerical lover of Laura wish to be admired and was he admired rather than by his sonnets in the inferior, in the vernacular Italian.

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